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THE ODYSSEY OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS:
ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN THE MIGRATION PROCESS

by

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A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

THE ODYSSEY OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN THE MIGRATION PROCESS

By

You Gene Kim

Advisor: Professor Mehdi Bozorgmehr

Since the Great Famine in the 1990s, many North Koreans have emigrated in search of better lives in South Korea or other countries. However, they face hardship and peril in every phase of this odyssey. In China, North Korean defectors suffer from the constant threat of being arrested and deported by the Chinese authorities. Furthermore, the Chinese government has refused to grant refugee status to North Korean defectors because of its desire to maintain positive diplomatic relations with North Korea. Consequently, most of the defectors aim to go to South Korea, though some young and educated North Koreans prefer the United States because of the possibility for better educational opportunities. In this thesis, I investigate the various issues and problems faced by North Koreans during their arduous journeys, which are marked by constant legal status changes. They start as defectors (illegal migrants), then become asylum seekers, and finally refugees. Even those who are fortunate enough to become citizens in the new host countries experience substantial difficulties in adjusting to new environments. North Korean refugee issues are important political and social concerns for China, South Korea, and the United States, but they also have implications for the entire world. Although this thesis mainly examines the problems North Koreans confront during their journeys, it also explores some solutions to the various challenges faced during resettlement. China should honor its commitment to the 1951 Refugee Convention by granting refugee status to defectors and not returning them to their homeland. The South Korean government should acknowledge that North Koreans experience difficulties adapting to South Korean society and adjust their

policies accordingly. Based on the spirit of NKHRA, the United States should not hesitate to accept the influx of North Korean refugees. Ultimately, this crisis can only be solved through international cooperation.

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The Odyssey of North Korean Defectors: Issues and Problems in the Migration Process

Introduction

Korea has a five thousand year-old history and its people have been composed of homogenous ethnic group in a single nation state for more than 1,300 years. However, since the end of World War II, Korea has been divided into two states. Under this geopolitical division, South Korea has evolved into a democratic country with an open-door policy towards foreign countries, while North Korea has remained isolated under the influence of communism and the dictatorship of a single family. As a consequence, South Korea has become an affluent and well-developed nation. By contrast, North Korea has continued to suffer from poverty and political polarization, and it has become one of the most secluded and aggressive nations in the world.

After the end of the Korean Civil War (1950-1953), a relatively small number of North Koreans attempted to flee to South Korea or other countries for economic, political, and religious reasons. During the 1980s, the number of defectors sharply increased due to the deterioration of the North Korean economy. In the 1990s, North Korea was confronted with the Great Famine, which motivated a mass exodus from North Korea to China. “Chronic food shortage, political repression, and the continuing weakness of the economy have driven thousands of North Koreans to cross the border into China’s Northeastern Provinces” (Chang et al. 2008: 1). Some North Korean defectors escaped to China with the intention of traveling to a third country located in Southeast Asia in search of asylum, with their final destinations being South Korea or countries in Europe and North America.

However, China has not protected the defectors who have crossed the border. On the contrary, China refused to grant legal refugee status to North Korean defectors and they consider

the defectors as illegal migrants. In worst cases, if the defectors are caught in China, they are repatriated to North Korea and face harassment, imprisonment, and even death penalty. In this context, China merely serves as a transit route to the final destination. After temporarily staying in China, many defectors have the intention of making one more stopover in South East Asia such as Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia to secure asylum from the host countries before continuing their journey to another country. Most of the defectors want to eventually settle in South Korea. However, some other defectors choose to go to countries in Europe and North America. Overall, “most of the defectors want to resettle in South Korea, though younger and better educated defectors have a great inclination to prefer the United States as a final destination” (Chang et al. 2008: 1). During the course of their journeys, North Korean defectors have to overcome unbearable hardships until they reach their final destination. After resettlement, they still have to cope with the difficulties of adjustment to their new life in the host countries.

Data

I decided not to interview North Korean defectors in the U.S. because most of them are hesitant to share their personal experiences with a stranger out of constant traumatic fears. Furthermore, many of them are used to hiding their identities. Instead, I chose to write a literature analysis based on narratives, published literary works, and Korean-based television broadcasts. Fortunately, narratives in *TED Talks* helped me in shaping the historical background and the reality of the painstaking process of crossing the border in North Korea. In addition, the archives in LiNK (Liberty of North Korea) provided rich resources of personal narratives and updates on individual’s life stories. Furthermore, Blaine Harden’s work *Escape from Camp 14* highlighted the experiences of a defector, Dong-hyuck Shin, and his arduous journey from North Korea to America. In particular, Korean-based television broadcasts have provided various contents to inform and

educate people about the lives of North Koreans. The broadcasts include documentaries heavily focused on reporting facts about North Korean defection and the talk shows covering more humanistic and accessible components of defectors' lives.

Organization

Overall, this research is designed to explore four major components of North Korean defectors' resettlement journeys in relation to social, political, psychological struggles when they cross the border between North Korea and China and arrive at their final destination in South Korea or the United States. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, I have divided this research paper into six parts, along with those four components based on geographical sequences in North Korea, China, South Korea, and America.

To begin, I will briefly introduce the background history of North Korea and explain my data and methodology. For data analysis, I largely depend on the statistical data from Korean and American governments and narrative interviews from *TED Talks* lectures, documentary video clips on LiNK (Liberty in North Korea), and literary resources. In the next stage, I will define who North Korean defectors are. I will then move onto the geographical transition of North Korean defectors.

There are four major locations where the defectors temporarily stay and finally resettle. First, I will describe the process of crossing the border into China. As North Korean defectors are not allowed to have refugee status in China, eventually they realize China is not a right place to resettle permanently. Therefore, they embark on another adventure.

After that, I will discuss the socioeconomic and psychological hardships experienced by defectors during their resettlement in South Korea. While trying to adjust to a new life style, they often experience difficulties regarding the ideological and political gap between South Korea and

North Korea, which have resulted from seventy years of separation.

I dedicate more pages in talking about the U.S. than the other geographical locations to emphasize my hypothesis that increasingly more North Koreans are coming to the U.S. because of the strong “pull factors” of migration. Although most North Korean defectors decide to go to South Korea, quite a few of them prefer the U.S. because of better economic and educational opportunities. They simply wish to resettle in the U.S. for a better life. However, there are issues and problems among North Korean refugees in the U.S. while they adapt to their new lives. In the future, the U.S. government will have to formulate policies on North Korean refugees, along with other sociological aspects of migration and assimilation of North Koreans in the United States.

For my conclusion, I put emphasis on how to enhance North Koreans’ political and social status in the host countries of both South Korea and the United States. I will also bring up solutions for economic and psychological problems of North Korean refugees after their resettlement.

No one can predict what will happen in North Korea. North Korean regime may collapse in the near future, and the exodus of people will bring up complex issues of mass migration in South Korea as well as in China and the United States. The international community should pay attention to the prospect of North Korean migration in the near future.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

On the whole, this paper deals with the various issues and problems that confront North Korean defectors while they move from North Korea via China to their final destinations to South Korea or the United States. Their journey is full of challenges, which bring up questions of reasons and motivations, but also address the need for solutions. To this end, South Korean scholars have conducted various researches over the subjects of integration and adaptation issues in South Korea as well as the North Korean refugee issues in China. Yet, research on North Korean refugees in

the U.S. has been severely limited, and very little is known about social issues and other aspects of their lives in this “Land of Opportunity.” In fact, the vast majority of data focuses only on political concerns of U.S. policies towards North Koreans, such as nuclear proliferation.

Above all, my paper comprehensively deals with the North Koreans’ issues in four different regions: North Korea, China, South Korea, and the United States. Thus, my research questions are formulated according to the order of my literature review, which was categorized by those four different countries where the issues of North Koreans are raised. Correspondingly, the research questions are as follows:

- What makes North Koreans escape their home country?
- What are the motives of defection?
- How do they settle in China without legal status?
- What are the challenges and difficulties of North Koreans in China?
- Why do they have to choose a third country to arrive at their destination?
- What is the process of resettlement in South Korea?
- What are the issues and problems in adapting to South Korean society?
- Why do some North Koreans want to move to the U.S.?
- What are the issues on implementing NKHRA in the United States?
- What are the difficulties in adapting a new life in the U.S.?
- What lessons can be learned from U.S. policy towards Vietnamese refugees?
- What are some ways to improve U.S. policy towards North Korean refugees?
- What are the prospects of North Korean refugee resettlement in the U.S.?

In the following paragraphs, based on these research questions, I will generate the hypotheses to predict the future migration and resettlement patterns of North Koreans, particularly

in South Korea and the United States. Above all, my hypotheses will follow the stream of this paper, which is based on the issues on four different geographical regions.

North Koreans will increasingly cross the border of China because of the accessibility of the Internet and mobile phones in North Korean society. Thus, they will be exposed more often to the culture of free market economy of China and South Korea.

China will enforce the repatriation (*refoulement*) policy harsher than before because they want to maintain the diplomatic relationship with North Korea as a formal ally. Furthermore, China wants to keep its political hegemony in the Far East by maintaining leverage over North Korea. Although China signed the Refugee Convention and Protocol, they do not allow North Korean defectors to have refugee status.

The number of North Korean defectors will increase in South Korea. However, North Koreans in South Korea will have difficulties in adapting into the South Korean society mainly because of the differences in ideology, culture, and even language.

More and more North Korean defectors will choose to come to the United States rather than South Korea because of the better pull factors in economic and educational opportunities. Many North Korean defectors in China have already recognized that they could experience harsh discrimination in South Korean society. They also want to get away from geographical contiguity from North Korea. There are just few reasons that more North Korean defectors will choose to come to the U.S. instead of South Korea. As a consequence, the U.S. government will also have to prepare for the large influx of North Koreans in the future.

Literature Review

Due to various sensitive issues involving confidentiality, safety, and access, there are limited primary sources regarding North Korean defectors. However, I was able to find ample secondary primary resources such as articles, books, newspapers, and even YouTube recordings based on studies by scholars of North Korea and its defectors. The literature and reports from the U.S. government, the South Korean government, and related NGO's also contributed to the structuring of my review of relevant literature.

As indicated earlier, I will chronologically examine four geographical areas, starting from North Korea via China to South Korea or the United States. Thus, the structure of this literature review will parallel the body of this thesis. In most cases, North Korean defectors begin their arduous journey by leaving North Korea, crossing either the Yalu or Tumen River, arriving in China, and then moving on to their final destination (mostly South Korea or occasionally to the United States). This odyssey is full of issues and problems, which have been explored and revealed by scholars from various different fields. This research, without a doubt, has contributed to my understanding of the issues and problems of North Korean defectors or refugees who undergo political, social, economic, and psychological hardships throughout their seemingly endless plight.

Who are refugees?

There are diverse and complex motivations for migration. Some people move to new countries to enhance their economic situations, while others leave their home countries to escape from human rights abuses such as torture, persecution, armed conflict, extreme poverty, and even death. Among those various types of migrants, refugees are defined as “people who have been forced to leave their country because there is a war there or because of their political or religious belief” (Newbury House Cobuild English Learner Dictionary). More specifically, in the 1951

Refugee Conventional, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner to Refugees) said that “a refugee is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UN Refugee Agency 1967: 16). Above all, to attain refugee status, one has to first become an asylum seeker. The following quotation clarifies the distinction between a refugee and an asylum seeker:

Asylum seekers are people who move across borders in search of protection, but who may not fulfill the strict criteria laid down by the 1951 Convention. Asylum seeker describes someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status. Refugee is the term used to describe a person who has already been granted protection. Asylum seekers can become refugees if the local immigration or refugee authority deems them as fitting the international definition of refugee (UNESCO: http://www.unesco.org/most/migration/glossary_asylum_seeker.htm).

Above all, the 1951 Convention is the key legal document in defining who a refugee is. In this respect, North Korean defectors are not simply economic migrants, as the Chinese government constantly argues. Instead, they should be considered bona fide refugees under the definition of the UNHCR. Article 33 of the Convention guarantees “*non-refoulement*”, which forbids rendering victims of persecution to their persecutors: “No contracting state shall expel or return (*refouler*) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of terrorists where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (The UN Refugee Agency 1967: 32). The above paragraph and block quotation defined refugee status and the difference between refugees and asylum seekers. The following quotation clarifies the distinction between economic migrants and refugees:

Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve the future prospects of themselves and their families. Refugees have to move if they are to save their lives or preserve their freedom. They have no protection from their own state. Indeed, it is often their own government that is threatening to persecute them. If other countries do not let them in, and do not

help them once they are in, then they may be condemning them to death, or to an intolerable life in the shadows, without sustenance and without rights (UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html>).

More specifically, Zolberg (1989) addresses the definitional problem of “refugee” as follows: “Although the term ‘refugee’ has deep historical roots, its significance as a legal and administrative category has been vastly enhanced in our own times” (Zolberg et al. 1989:3). Zolberg further points out how UNHCR defines the term of “refugee”. According to UNHCR, refugees have to meet certain situational requirements, including “emergency assistance, protection, refoulement, pirate attacks on ‘boat people’ at sea, integration problems, resettlement, repatriation” (UNHCR 1985: 17; Zolberg et al. 1989: 6). Overall, Zolberg criticizes the UNHCR because he thinks that they are comparatively neutral about political presentation. “This is important not only to foster a more rational refugee policy but also to ensure that well-meaning individuals and groups do not become unwitting instruments for ends of which they would not approve” (1989: 272). In short, the review of the literature relating to the definition of refugee is quite essential for the development of this research because North Korean defectors ultimately become refugees in their final stage of the migration.

Methodology

As indicated in the literature review of this paper, I gathered and analyzed the works of scholars in relation to the general theme of North Korean migration mainly from their articles. I also referred to the literatures and reports from the government agencies of South Korea and the United States. In particular, some master’s theses were quite helpful in organizing the structure of my data collection.

Overall, I collected and reviewed more than forty articles. Additionally, I read three books, which were invaluable to my research. I specifically focused on *TED Talks* testimonies of young

North Korean refugees who have successfully resettled in their new lives in America. I also read newspaper articles about tragic experiences of North Koreans in New York City.

Secondary literature sources comprised the majority of the data collection for this thesis. I then used the data gathered from the articles, books, government publications, reports, and interviews and appropriately classified them into four categories: 1) North Korean issues; push factors and defections of North Koreans, 2) China; North Korean defectors' lives, refugee status, and migration issues, 3) South Korea; issues and problems of integration and adaptation, 4) the U.S.; resettlement issues and prospects of North Korean refugees, and U.S. government policy

The purpose of this study is to discover what issues North Koreans are confronted with during the course of their journey to their final destination and, ultimately, to find the solution of the challenges and problems of their resettlement in their new homes. I come to understand that it is very difficult to make contact with North Koreans in the U.S. due to the scarcity of the number of people. Besides, most of them do not want to expose themselves to the outside world because they are worried about what North Korean authorities might do to their families left behind in North Korea. Consequently, they tend to be withdrawn and unwilling to participate in research projects. For this reason, as an alternative, I tried to collect data through indirect contact with North Koreans through social media.

Social Media: TED Talks and LiNK (Liberty in North Korea)

In recent years, North Korean refugees have been introduced to various social media. This is significant because North Korea has always been restrictive about information and communication going in and out of the country. In particular, *TED Talks* have helped to bring world-wide attention to their plight by sharing the refugees' vivid life experiences about their long journeys. Additionally, it has brought much-needed attention in terms of humanitarian concerns

by manifesting the political and economic dilemmas of North Korea.

Joseph Kim and Hyunseo Lee shared their life stories via *TED Talks*. Both of them confronted physical and psychological distress while they were crossing the border into China. During the Great Famine in the 1990s, Joseph Kim (2013) used to suffer greatly. His mother was a simple border crosser who temporarily stayed in China as a breadwinner and moved back to North Korea to support the family. However, one day, his mother mysteriously disappeared. As a result, he and his sister constantly struggled from extreme poverty and hunger in North Korea. In 2006, at the age of 16, he decided to cross the border with his sister. Unfortunately, he lost his sister and became an orphan in China. He begged, stole food, and worked at illegal markets and coalmines to survive. “While hiding in China, he met a Korean-Chinese old lady who protected and fed him until he found help from Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), an NGO that provided more stabilized shelter and later helped him to escape to the U.S.” (Joseph Kim 2013: *TED Talks*). In 2007, he officially achieved refugee status in the U.S. and started attending school. In this case, Joseph started out as a simple border crosser, ended up becoming an economic defector, then finally became a refugee.

Hyeonseo Lee (2013) escaped to China in 1997 and came to Seoul, South Korea in 2008. She also shared her personal stories on *TED Talks*. She explained the arduous process of defection when she was young. When she attended North Korean schools, she believed that North Korea was the most ideal place to live in the world. She was also taught that the outside world, especially U.S., South Korea, and Japan were all enemies. However, she was shocked when she witnessed the people dying from hunger on the street. She was afraid that she was going to die like them, so she decided to escape from North Korea and fled to China in 1997. When she lived in China, she was defined as an illegal migrant. As a result, she had to cope with constant fear of disclosure of

her identity to Chinese police officers, which were grounds for deportation to North Korea. In order not to arouse suspicion, she made efforts to learn to speak fluent Chinese. Ten years later, in 2008, she decided to defect to South Korea. However, after she went through the resettlement, she experienced an identity crisis while she was in South Korea. In her speech, she admitted that South Korea and North Korea were two different nations based on contrasting socioeconomic structures. After a while, she attended Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and became an activist.

Danny Lee (2013) documented his experience on video clip, which explains that most young North Korean civilians who do not know any better about outside world think of North Korea as a so-called “Socialist Paradise.” In fact, young students are brainwashed by *Ju-Che* Ideology into thinking that North Korean Regime is the most powerful nation in the world. Yet, in reality, after Kim Il Sung’s death, the North Korean regime deteriorated greatly and the civilians suffered from extreme poverty and hunger. Under these economic circumstances, Danny Lee’s family was no exception, and his mother became a simple border crosser to feed her family. From the year 1997, she went back and forth from North Korea to China to earn a basic living. Naturally, her eyes were opened in China, and she learned the reality about South Korea and other countries in China and realized North Korea was not a proper place to live. Thus, she decided to stay in China and wondered how she could get her family to join her. After many years of being separated from his mother, Danny left North Korea in 2004. While he was crossing the Tumen River, he saw the dead bodies of defectors floating in the river. If the guards captured the defectors, they would shoot the border crossers to death. Despite the risks, Danny arrived in Northeastern China, and in 2006, he was able to come to the United States. Overall, he was protected under U.S. government and achieved U.S. permanent residency in 2007. In 2010, he started to share his experiences through LiNK and got a job at a Korean Newspaper company in California. Now, he wants to play

a role as a global bridge between North Korean defectors and the outside free world.

I also found an article in the newspaper about one female North Korean refugee in Washington, DC. Her name is Young-Ae Ma. She used to be a member of a national female dancing and singing team in North Korea before she crossed the border and stayed in China. While she was in China, she worked at a Korean community church. However, she was an illegal alien and Chinese government did not give her any legal status as a resident. Then, she decided to escape, but she left her son in China and faced the perilous journey to South Korea alone. She arrived in South Korea in August 2001. However, she decided to leave South Korea because the South Korean government did not allow her to talk about North Korean civil rights in public. In 2004, she got a Korean passport and flew to New York to enroll in a language school with a student visa. While she was in New York, she went to a Korean community church and attended some colleges to extend her stay in the United States. Then, she got admitted to a theology school in California and studied there from 2006 to 2009. After graduating, she went to Washington, DC and still lives there with her husband and son. She did not clearly explain how she got her legal residency in the United States. Now, she is involved in economic, political, and religious activities. Currently, she runs a small Korean grocery distribution company with her husband. Also, she became an activist and tries to educate American society about the horrors of the North Korean regime. “North Korean human rights are not secure. There is no freedom. The North Korean government contains them because they don’t want them to have exposure to the outside world” (Gerson 2006).

All of the narratives of North Koreans in the preceding paragraphs are important sources of data that can be used for developing my thesis. These vivid life experiences, in addition to my secondary literature references, will be the primary sources for my data gathering methodology. The data collection from *TED Talks* and LiNK, as well as the many newspaper articles that I

collected, will supplement the theme of this paper. Above all, they are the true stories of North Korean defectors who had to overcome unimaginable hardships during their journeys from North Korea to their final destinations. Every piece of their testimony is authentic data for my research.

Findings

Humanitarian Disaster in North Korea

In his book, *Preparing for the Possibility of North Korean Collapse*, Bennett (2013) indicates that “North Korea suffers from a humanitarian disaster even today: In many parts of the country it has insufficient food to feed its people, inadequate medicine, and unacceptable water.” (139). He then illustrates five major contributing factors to why North Korea has been confronted with this crisis. First, he argues that North Korea has inadequate national supplies due to famine, a collapsing economy, and impartial economic policies that favor the military and politicians. Bennett further criticizes the North Korean government by citing its bad behaviors including “provocations, proliferation, and human right violations which have made North Korea a pariah in the international community, making many potential donors unwilling to provide” (Bennett 2013: 141). Second, Bennett points out that North Korea has inadequate local supplies. Specifically, “the North Korean government has taken control of much of the food and other humanitarian supplies and distributes these supplies with preference to the elites and the military” (Bennett 2013: 141). Also, transportation is limited in North Korea. The North Korean government terminated its railroad system, so it is difficult to carry food to other regions. According to Bennett (2013), most of the food production is geared towards the south of Pyongyang, but most of the population is concentrated north of Pyongyang. In particular, North Koreans who reside north of the Pyongyang were most affected by the Great Famine of the mid to late 1990s. In this regard, the regional disparity is extreme in North Korea. Third, except for elites and members of the militaries, the

majority of civilians suffer from a lack of individual financial resources, namely money to purchase food. Yet, the average North Korean incomes are insufficient to feed entire families. After the government collapse, many people lost their jobs or did not get paid on a regular basis. Thus, they had to find other routes to acquire food. Fourth, supply disruptions also contributed to the humanitarian disaster in North Korea. After the Great Famine and the government collapse, even the limited supply of food of North Korea was further reduced (2013: 141). Moreover, the North Korean military and elites have made the situation worse by appropriating food and other supplies, because they control the goods received from the outside world. Up until now, South Korea and other NGO's have provided assistances to North Korea in the form of food and money, however, in most cases, civilians have not been able to receive those goods. Finally, Bennett mentions North Korean health crisis originated from chronically inadequate food supply and poor health conditions, which made the population even more vulnerable to diseases. In addition to the lack of food, the lack of medical care and vaccines have made the humanitarian disaster even worse.

The above factors, which caused the humanitarian disaster in North Korea, have significantly contributed to increased North Korean defection. Overall, "Massive refugee flows are a natural result of humanitarian disaster" (Bennett 2013: 142).

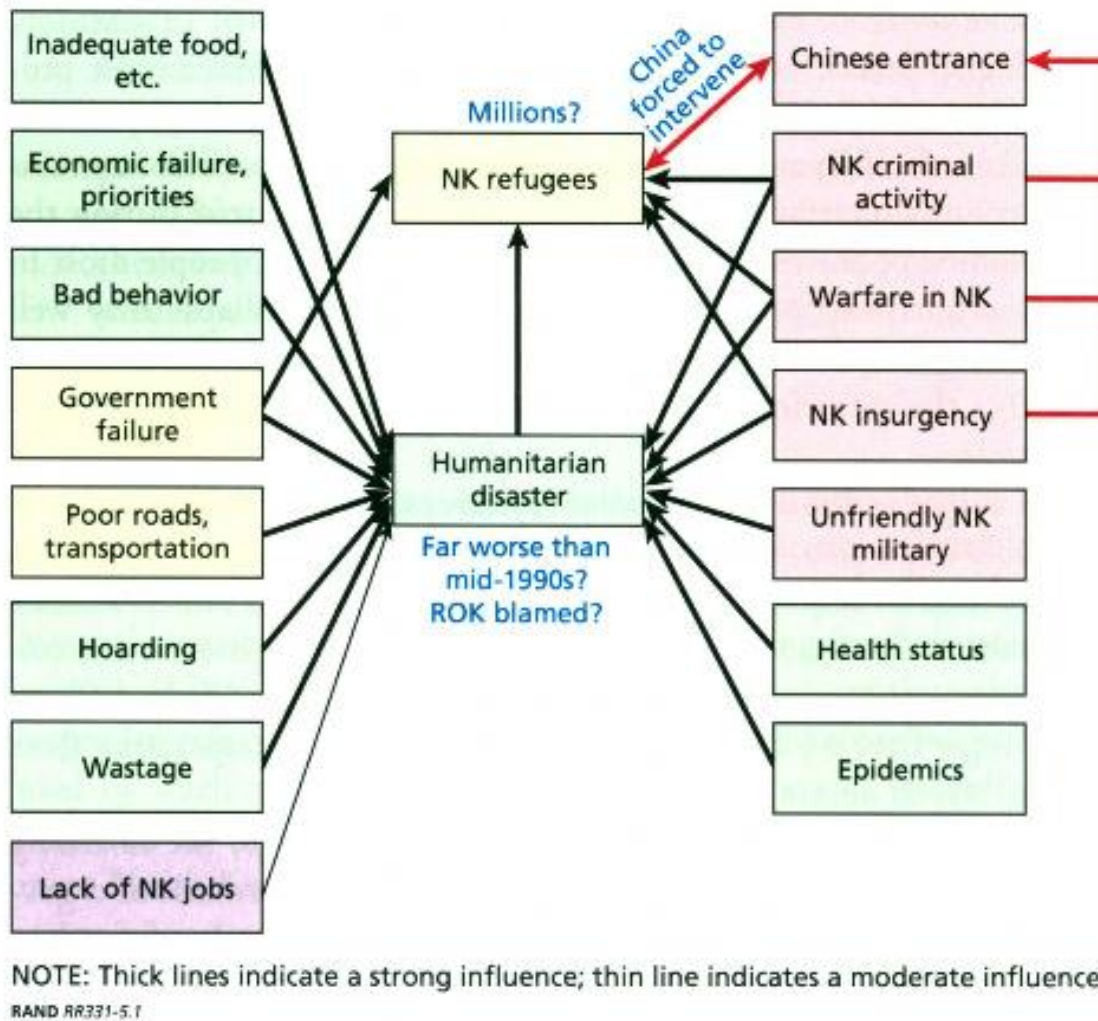


Figure 1: Humanitarian Challenges after a North Korean Collapse (Bennett 2013: 140)

Who are the North Korean Defectors?

The Great Famine of the 1990s, which resulted in mass starvation, an epidemic of disease, and death on a mass scale, triggered a wave of defection of North Koreans. “The famine and continuing economic crisis have had devastating effect on children. Particularly, many North Korean youths are leaving their country in search for food for their families and for themselves” (Kim Sook Hyun 2012: 1). A common method of defection is crossing the border into Jilin and Liaoning in Northeast region of China. After crossing the Chinese border, North Korean defectors

experience the constant threat of being arrested and repatriated by the Chinese authorities. They are also exposed to exploitive labor, forced prostitutions, and human trafficking. Since China is a close ally of North Korea, the government refuses to grant North Korean defectors legal status and considers them undocumented migrants.

Defectors have fled from North Korea not only as a result of political persecution, but also for economic reasons driven by hunger, malnutrition, and starvation. Before reaching South Korea, defectors in China experience constant fear of being repatriated to North Korea based on their illegal status. “In spite of these hardships and miseries, the defectors cannot return to their homeland. Even those who crossed the border with the imminent threat of starvation and no political motivation fear that North Korea will consider them as political turncoat and thus national traitors” (Kim Sung Ho 2003: 3).

Even if the defectors are educated and brainwashed into resisting foreign influences, many of them consider escaping from North Korea due to poor living conditions. North Korea’s deteriorating economy and failure of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the mid-1990s resulted in chronic food shortages. Under these circumstances, many North Koreans traveled around the country to exchange clothes or other resources for food in black markets, which was prohibited. Furthermore, people began crossing the Tumen River, which makes up roughly one-third of North Korea’s border with China, in search of food and resources. A few months later, they would slip back to North Korea. In the course of these illegal back-and forth journeys, North Koreans began to realize that there was a bigger and more prosperous world outside of North Korea. Indeed, this gave them hopes and dreams of finding a better life. Despite the risk of severe tortures and even execution to their family members and offspring who remained in North Korea, the exodus of North Koreans across the Chinese border in search of a new life and freedom has

surged.

Motivation to defect

For decades, daily life for North Koreans has been a battle to survive from chronic food shortages, widespread starvation, and economic collapse under a repressive regime. “Refugees consider leaving their homeland for diverse reasons, some having to do with the ‘push’ factors associated with deprivation or persecution, others having to do with ‘pull’ factors based on opportunities in the target countries” (Chang et al. 2008: 5). Overall, hunger and searching for food were major push factors. However, a Human Rights Report indicated that hunger was only a small part of the motivation for flight; rather, political factors such as political persecution based on family history, loss of status, frustration over lack of opportunities, and desire to experience freedom outside of North Korea were greater motivating factors for escape and defection. The mid-1990s national food crisis was partly caused by structural issues starting the early 1980s with North Korea’s food rotating system and successive clamorous natural disasters in North Korea between 1994 and 1997 (Amnesty International 2004: 6). In fact, North Korea’s Great Famine, which resulted in a death toll of massive scale, is recognized to be one of the worst famines of the 20th century. After all, the various motives of the defection can be divided into three categories: simple border-crossers, economic refugees, and political refugees.

Push Factors and Pull Factors

In her doctoral thesis titled “Refugees Traumatic Experiences and Solutions” (Seoul; KSCI, in Korean Language), Hyun Kyung Kim (2009) briefly defined five major push factors why North Koreans left their homeland: 1) War and political chaos, 2) the risk of punishment for criticizing the North Korean regime, 3) structural discrimination and persecution based on social caste system, which still exists in North Korea, restricted to the lower caste from being able to afford

their living, choose religions, and the opportunity to receive education. Additionally, they had to cope with constant social tension and fear, 4) economic crisis and poverty, and 5) searching for scattered family. In general, family unit movement is not easy and costs enormous amount of broker fees. Thus, in the beginning, one family member would cross the border alone. After one achieves economic stability in a new place, then he or she invites his or her family members to live together.

Hyun Kyung Kim (2009) also specified four major pull factors why North Koreans choose to live in other countries: 1) Security and protection of individual identity, 2) accessibility of sojourning, 3) better job opportunities in China, even when the available jobs and cheap manual labor or even prostitution or other undesirable work, 4) the better and higher-quality of education opportunities. However, it should be noted that illegal migrants are not eligible to receive education at public schools in China. If defectors are able to pay, they can attend private schools. Even with all of these complex factors of migration, North Koreans continue to escape to China.

Life in China

Exodus to China

Tens of thousands of North Koreans have fled to China for food, survival, and better life opportunities since the Great Famine of 1990s. The greatest push factor that impels North Koreans into China is still the food shortage. China and North Korea are divided by a long and porous border demarcated by the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. The most important official border crossing points are Sinuiju, which is located in the North Korean province of North Pyongan (DPRK), which faces Dandong, located in the Chinese province of Liaoning in the West; and Onsong County in the North Korean province of North Hamyang that faces Tumen, in the prefecture of Yanbian, in east China. Hyesan, in the North Korean province of Ryanggang, which also borders

Yanbian, provides another regular exist point into China form the DPRK.

The border region is mountainous, forested and sparely populated. It is easy for North Koreans to cross at narrow sections of the river, especially in winter, when temperatures reach 40 below zero (Celsius) and the river freezes, and it is possible to walk across. In general, North Korean defectors seeking sanctuary in China cross the Tumen River into Yanbian (Korean Autonomous Prefecture) in China. “Because of its large population of Korean-Chinese, North Koreans have a good chance of finding people in Yanbian with whom they can communicate and who are willing to provide them shelters and economic support” (Charny 2004: 81). However, crossing the border and finding help from Korean-Chinese is by no means the end of defection. Once the defectors reach China, they usually get help from local Korean-Chinese, missionaries, NGOs, or other organizations. The overwhelming majority (88%) reported receiving help from Korean-Chinese community directly.



Figure 2. The map of North Korea, China, and Third Countries (Source: Radio Free Asia; Lee Shin-Hwa 2013:191)

Refugee Status of North Korean Defectors

The Chinese government policy towards North Korean defectors is based on the assumption that all North Korean defectors cross the border only for economic reasons. Thus, border crossers (who are negatively referred to as “wetbacks”) are treated as illegal migrants and are subject to arrest and deportation. As a consequence, North Korean defectors caught by

authorities in China have to face repatriation back to North Korea. Although China is a member of UN Refugee Convention, it does not fully comply with its international obligations. Therefore, it is difficult for the defectors to seek protection from UNHCR and gain refugee status. “China cities North Korean refugees as ‘economic migrants’ thereby ignoring their commitment to the 1951 Convention of the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which was signed in 1982. Their policy on repatriation of refugees belies their claims that it is a country that follows international law” (Robinson 2010: 10).

Under these adverse laws, Chinese officials, however, have generally ignored the inflow of North Koreans as long as they keep quiet and do not cause any problems in Chinese society. Yet, the status of the North Korean defectors has never been changed and they are considered as illegal migrants. “China does not usually allow North Koreans to apply for political asylum. Moreover China indicates it is obliged under a bilateral 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea to return all border crossers” (Margesson et al. 2007: CRS 11). In this sense, defining the status of North Korean defectors in China is not simple. Even though North Koreans have defected due to the economic factors, political reasons cannot be separated from the primary reasons to defect. According to UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), even those who arrive in search of food may have a claim for refugees status “*Sur Place*” because they would be at risk of persecution if they returned. Accordingly, most North Korean defectors in China deserve to be treated as refugees on the ground that they will be punished or executed by North Korean regime if they are deported back to North Korea. In the meantime, the Chinese government still retains an unfavorable political standpoint on refugee issues regarding North Korean defection. It is clear that China violates its obligations to abide by the principle of *non-refoulement* under the Refugee Convention Protocol. As a consequence, the coerced repatriation of North Korean

defectors by China calls for international accusations against China's breach of 1951 Refugee Convention Agreements. However, in order to justify their policy, China constantly argues that North Korean defectors are largely economic migrants. In other words, China aspires to keep strong political and economic ties with North Korea. Furthermore, China does not welcome the large-scale exodus of North Koreans to industrial Northeast China because this region was historically involved in territorial dispute. Also, China has to deal with the prospects of conflicts with other minority tribes. "Chinese officials undoubtedly are also concerned that allowing international groups access could set up an unwanted precedent that could be used in future refugee scenarios involving other ethnic groups in other parts of China such as Tibetans or Uighurs" (2007: CRS 12). China does not want the bordering Northeast area to become heavily populated with North Koreans because they are afraid that it may result in a scenario of minority resistance much like the situation with Tibetans and Uighurs.

The Plight of North Korean defectors in China

The life of North Korean defectors in China is desperate and plagued with economic and psychological problems as well as other problems. Once they arrive at Chinese territory, their plight immediately starts. Their difficulties begin as soon as they set foot in China, as they are immediately at risk for arrest and deportation. "They have no realistic options to live freely and meet their basic needs, and the few courageous individuals and organizations seeking to provide protection and assistance, whether Korean-Chinese, South Koreans, or the rare few from outside the region, are themselves under constant pressure from the Chinese authorities to curtail their activities or risk expulsion" (Charny 2004: 83). Under this severe situation, North Korean defectors are confronted with a diverse array of difficulty because they do not have specific future plans yet.

First and foremost, their primary concern on arrival is finding food and shelter. Most

refugees begin their lives in China by begging for food and shelter. “Typically they begin by contacting the local Korean-Chinese who, in many cases are willing to render help, although not for long” (Chung et al. 2004: 85). A few are able to find shelters in villages and farms where they are supported by Korean ethnic communities while others find works in the cities engaging in service industry jobs. However, they are always vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination owing to their lack of legal status. Some defectors work full-time just for food and shelter without getting paid. The worst case is that their employers are able to have leverage in their refusal to pay by threatening to report the North Korean defectors to the authorities. Some Chinese employers use the excuse that they are short of money or simply promise to pay during the next harvest term.

Females compose the majority North Korean defectors in China; approximately two-thirds of North Korean refugees are females. From their perspectives, marriage is an instrumental form of making a living in China. It is estimated that 80% of the female North Korean defectors are trafficked into forced marriages or channeled into the sex industry. Unfortunately, female North Korean refugees agree to be sold by traffickers because they desperately want to escape from North Korea. “The overwhelming majority of North Korean women seeking to stay in China establish relationship with Chinese men, either through brokers or directly, as a survival strategy” (Charny 2004: 83). To exploit this situation, matchmakers and human traffickers make profits by selling North Korean women to local Chinese men. They are usually able to convince hunger-stricken North Korean women that they will enhance their life if they marry Chinese men. “There are also some Chinese men who want to buy North Korean women and use them as hostesses in bars or as prostitutes” (Chung et al. 2004: 87). Under these circumstances, North Korean women are likely to lead a highly vulnerable existence in China. The principal reason for this stems from their unstable status.

As the Chinese Government deems them to be illegal economic migrants, those caught by Chinese authorities are deported back to DPRK. All undocumented North Korean women live with this fear, irrespective of their job, marital status, ties with the Chinese community, or whether they consented or were trafficked into marriage. Their unfamiliarity of their new surrounding and inability to communicate in Chinese make them wary of any exposure to the local community, as such an exposure would make them more vulnerable to detection and deportation (Mucio 2005: 7).

In addition to those hardships of North Korean females, North Korean children are also vulnerable to the new unfamiliar environment of China. Since they cannot speak Chinese and are at the risk of being detected, they hardly ever venture out of their homes, and only a small number of children have access to education. A few attend church-run schools and even few attend Chinese schools. In some special cases, families can afford the fee to enroll their children in Chinese schools. However, as of June 2004, increasing crackdowns by Chinese police forced North Korean children to stay out of schools to avoid detection. In the worst cases, North Korean children become separated from their parents. Some of them come to China all by themselves, while others become separated from their parents while escaping from North Korea. They are commonly found on the streets begging for food or selling something so they can buy food. Furthermore, job opportunities for young North Koreans are blocked because of the strict surveillance of Chinese authorities. As a result, these children of North Korean defectors roam around the streets until they happen to be rescued by NGO's or church missionaries, which largely depends on luck. If they are fortunate enough to get help, they may possibly try to flee to South Korea or other refugee accepting-countries. In general, the chances of getting help from the South Korean embassy or the South Korean government are quite slim because of the political and diplomatic relationships between China and the two Koreas.

With all those economic, social, and status problems, North Korean defectors usually confront psychological distress because of diverse reasons. "Aside from economic problems,

North Korean defectors suffer from various psychological problems. One of these problems arises from the status of being a defector—they live in constant fear of arrest and repatriation. They say that if they were sent back to North Korea, they would be humiliated, tortured, sent to prison camp or even executed in public” (Chung et al. 2004: 88-89). Undeniably, the fear of arrest and deportation is an intrinsic cause of psychological distress among most North Korean defectors residing in China. Discrimination and prejudice against defectors by local citizens are the other source of psychological stress. The Chinese tend to treat North Korean defectors as if they were beggars; sadly, in many cases, that is indeed the case. The last and the most severe psychological problem among North Korean defectors is the concern about their family members left behind in North Korea. It has been widely reported that North Korean defectors are labeled as traitors and thus, their family members left behind in North Korea are constantly under surveillance as the family members of traitors. Due to those problems, the majority of defectors in China never give up their dreams to go to South Korea or the United States. However, only a small number of them are successful in realizing their dreams. According to a survey, 64.3% chose South Korea and 19.1% chose U.S. as their preferred destination for permanent resettlement.

Preferred Destination for Permanent North Korean Resettlement

Destination	Number	Percent (%)
South Korea	802	64.3
United States	238	19.1
China	178	14.3
Others	29	1.3
Total	1,247	100.0

Figure 3: (Chang et al. 2008: Appendix; Table 8)

Even though North Korean defectors staying in China wish to reach their final destinations, only a small number successfully accomplish their goals. The main reason stems from the political attitude of the Chinese government. Thus, various channels of international humanitarian communities have accused China of breaching refugee convention agreement. Under this political interest of China, thousands of North Koreans are trying to go to a third country with the hope of finding asylums for reaching their final destinations.

The Process of Entry into South Korea

As China refuses to grant refugee status to North Korean defectors and considers them illegal economic migrants, those who wish to move to the final destinations should achieve legal refugee status. It is estimated that approximately 300,000 to 500,000 of North Korean defectors live in the Northeastern region of China; of that number, roughly 30,000 to 50,000 wish to settle in South Korea. However, as mentioned earlier, only small minorities of defectors are able to fulfill of their wishes. This begs questions, how can defectors successfully find a route to enter South Korea? In general, there are three ways to enter South Korea, all of which are full of difficulties and risks. The first, and most obvious route is to visit South Korean embassy and consulates in China and simply ask for asylum. Although visiting the South Korea-based agencies is accessible, agencies in China are virtually of no help. North Koreans who request help from South Korean officials in China become frustrated and disappointed at their cold and neutral gestures. Because of the political and diplomatic concerns, South Korean officials are practically powerless to assist their helpless brethren. Again, this goes back to the fact that China does not recognize North Koreans as refugees due to the diplomatic standpoint with North Korea. Under this disappointing situation, North Korean defectors cannot help choosing a long escape route to enter South Korea.

As an alternative, some defectors choose moving to third countries where Korean

embassies and consulates are more favorable to them. “Korean embassies and consulates in ‘third countries’ such as Thailand and Vietnam appear to be more willing to offer help. The problem with this route is crossing the Chinese continent, which stretches for over 3,000 miles” (Chung et al. 2004: 92). An enormous amount of time and money are required to cover this journey and this does not even fully guarantee being able to enter South Korea. After crossing the border into Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, or Laos, they are occasionally captured by the local police and deported to the Chinese police. Thus, they hire guides or brokers who can safely lead them to cities in third countries where South Korean embassies are nearby. In order to secure the “safe routes” the defectors have to procure even more money to afford the long journey as well as the bribes for bordering patrol officers on both sides of the border. In this course of journey, a network of South Korean, Japanese, American, and European NGO’s offer support to them. “They help set up escape routes akin to ‘underground railroad’ in the US for slaves seeking freedom in 19th Century” (Margessen et al. 2007: CRS 13). Once North Korea defectors arrive at cities such as Bangkok or Hanoi, they usually contact South Korean embassies or consulates to get help entering South Korea.

As mentioned earlier, only a small number of North Koreans in China are able to make their way to third countries to seek asylum. Furthermore, some escape routes through third countries are difficult because of the uncooperative governments such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Burma. Those governments are unwilling to help the defectors mainly because of the diplomatic relationships with North Korea. “Cambodia is a party to Refugee Convention and its Protocol, Laos and Burma are parties to neither, which means they are not all obligated to provide resources and protection for refugees” (2007: CRS 15). On the other hand, Thailand’s attitude towards North Korean defectors is more tolerable than those of other Southeast Asian

countries and cracks down less against North Korean asylum seekers. In fact, Thailand has quietly cooperated in sending defectors to South Korea for resettlement, but because of the increasing number of North Korean defectors, Bangkok authorities have begun to intensify the measure to prevent illegal entry by North Koreans. Indeed, Thailand is not a party to Refugee Convention and Protocol.

The North Korean “underground railway” through Southeast Asia is a long way full of perils and hardships passing through hurdle after hurdle on the way to South Korea. Wherever they may stay, North Korean defectors’ lives are full of fear of getting arrested until they safely land in South Korea. With the help of South Korean agencies and the NGO’s from all over the world, a few North Korean defectors are able to finally arrive on South Korean soil where they can start their new life.

Resettlement in South Korea

The Process of Resettlement in South Korea

After a long and treacherous voyage, North Korean defectors finally arrive at their destination, South Korea, the Promised Land. Yet, before, they are released into South Korean society, they are required to take several steps. “Immediately following their arrival at the airport, they are taken to a facility for investigation and accommodation operated by an intelligence Service under the Ministry of National Defense” (International Crisis Group 2006: 26). First, they are interrogated and the National Intelligence Service verifies their identities. They usually stay there for a month to go through intensive questioning whether they are pure defectors or North Korean secret agents.

After a month-long stay at the government investigation facility, North Korean defectors are transferred to a resettlement education center, known as “*Hanawon*” (House of Unity), which

was established by the Ministry of Unification (MOU). “The program focuses on social adjustment education, on site medical care, professional counseling and some basic daily life skills like driving, computer, and vocational training” (International Crisis Group 2006: 27). Although it helps the defectors in some ways, on the flip side, this resettlement education center’s functions are similar to a control and surveillance facility, as defectors are not allowed to go outside of the facility during their three-month stay. Additionally, males and females live in separated facilities until they are released into South Korean society. Correspondingly, some defectors criticize the system, comparing it to another form of refugee camp. They feel that they are restricted, in spite of having the pursuits for freedom.

At the end of the education and training process at “*Hanawon*”, the defectors are permitted to decide where they choose to live and get assistance through a network of private and public institutions in order to begin their new life in South Korea. At this point, the defectors can select their favorite regions throughout the Korean peninsula. The majority of them prefer to reside near the capital city, Seoul, while some prefer southern provinces because they are further from North Korea. With all the hopes of resettlement in the new places, however, the defectors soon realize that utopia does not exist anywhere. Lankov (2006) points out in his article, “Bitter Taste of Paradise” that “From that time forward, the defector is almost completely his or her own and begins to face challenges of adjustment to a new life” (Lankov 2006: 61).

When a defector decide to move into his or her preferred district, a regional “Hana Center” assists them closely during the transition and resettlement in the new society. In fact, there are 30 regional Hana Centers in South Korea. As 67% of the defectors have resettled in Seoul or near the Seoul area, most of the centers are concentrated in Seoul or the cities in the neighboring State of Gyunggido. Haesun Cho, who worked for the Ministry of Unification explained the basic function

of Hana Center:

Hana Center is like a supplemental place in which works with North Korean defectors who have finished the 3-month program at “Hanawon” more closely in their residential areas, so the center can provide more practical and specific help that North Korean defectors get three weeks education about the particular regions they live in and get any services or help they need, such as language, for one year so that they can successfully adjust to their new residential life and people (Cho Haesun 2010).

As a rule, before the defectors are dispersed to the local Hana Centers, they get support from South Korean government. In her journal, Tara O (2011) reports the situations as follows:

At the end of their Hanawon stay the government provides additional support to help them begin their lives in the mainstream South Korean society, in accordance with provisions of the 1997 Act on Protection and Resettlement Support for the Residents Who Escaped from North Korea. Under this law, each North Korean adult receives 36,969,000 won (about \$ 35,260) of which amount \$7,245 is for a down payment toward a permanent apartment. (Tara O 2011: 156).

In addition to this housing program, there are various other kinds of support from South Korean government to the defectors once they resettle in their own destinations. Each defector has an assigned counselor, who provides professional guidance, information about job opportunities, and recommendations for vocational training centers. Other than housing and employment benefits, there is one more special incentive for young North Koreans’ educations. “The special Admission System for Expatriates offers extraordinary opportunities to young North Koreans. It allows North Koreans with high school diplomas to enter universities on a non-competitive basis, remarkable in South Korean intensely competitive education system” (Tara O 2011: 157). Despite the high dropout rate, this chance of education is still a great benefit for young North Koreans. Moreover, the government pays the entire tuition until they complete their bachelor degrees. Overall, employment, education, medical care, and resettlement money are four basic support that the defectors usually get from the government. In addition, religious institutions aid the defectors through voluntary charities. Some enterprises have their own employment programs targeted to

North Koreans.

The Crisis of Resettlement of North Korean Defectors

Even with so many kinds of different supports from the South Korean government, North Korean defectors feel marginalized and isolated in the new society of South Korea. Thus, “assimilation of North Korean into South Korean society has proved especially challenging” (Tara O 2011: 158). When new defectors arrive in South Korea, most of them are overwhelmed with their new found freedom, the modernity of South Korea, and the choices they have to make living a free life as an individual. Under these circumstances, it is natural that defectors should face an arduous process of adaptation to a new life and culture. “They must redirect the attitude and values that were formed in North Korea. Then they need to establish new relationships with South Koreans and assimilate themselves to South Korean systems, customs, and culture” (Suh 2002: 68). On top of that, they have to adapt themselves to the capitalist work environment in order to find jobs and secure stable sources of incomes. At the same time, they also have to cope with psychological and emotional adjustment for their new life. However, many defectors have difficulties to adjust living in the new socioeconomic setting of South Korea. Upon their arrival, defectors usually have high expectations for their new life in South Korea. Despite the high expectations, they are quickly confronted by the bitter reality and are discouraged by their uncertain future. Furthermore, local South Koreans have negative perceptions of the defectors, viewing them as North Korean agents or troublesome neighbors. As a result, South Koreans are reluctant to hire and interact with defectors. A language barrier also exists between South Korea and North Korea. “South Koreans use a large number of English words and use different terms which are foreign to North Koreans” (Tara O 2011: 159). The defectors also lack experiences and knowledge in computers and other aspects of modern society in South Korea.

Interestingly, the problems differed by age group. The majority of young North Korean defectors have severe difficulties integrating in South Korea. “Their struggles include problems with schooling and education, social stigmatization, and cultural differences” (Sook Hyun Kim 2012: 4). In general, both North and South Koreans expect younger defectors to fit in without difficulties in South Korea because both countries share similar linguistic and historical aspects. However, during the 70 years separation, the two nations have developed the contrasting social and political structures, which have rendered two separate nations with the different ideologies and cultures.

One of the most critical problems is the educational gap between the refugee populations and South Korean adolescents. As the education in North Korea is outdated and distorted, refugees that come to South Korea are far behind South Korean students. Moreover, they missed several years of schooling because they spent time in North Korea, China, and sometimes third countries before entering South Korea. The conditions and crisis in adjustment for the defectors to settle in South Korea can be classified in four components.

First, North Korean defectors in South Korea are confronted with differences in attitude and value system. “North Korean defectors perceive South Korean politics, economy, society, and culture, in terms of their basic knowledge and preconceptions gained while living in the North” (Suh 2002: 76). As they had been taught to value of equality in the communist society, defectors had difficulty in understanding the capitalist systems. Even though they become aware of the difference, they blame the structures of South Korea when they face troubles. Thus, they fail to understand the fact that responsibility ultimately rests on them. “They think that a liberal democracy is anarchistic and that in a capitalistic society, money is everything” (Suh 2002: 76).

Second, most of the defectors originating from a low status group of North Korean society

are poorly educated and unlikely to have useful jobs in South Korea. Their average income is lower than that of South Koreans. “As the new comers they work at jobs set up by the government, but they soon quit. Their lack of experience and knowledge in English, Chinese characters, computer, and other elements of capitalist economy make their work life extremely difficult” (Suh 2002: 78). Naturally, North Korean defectors in a highly competitive South Korean society are not able to adjust in the new economic setting in South Korea.

Third, most North Korean defectors in South Korea mostly have to spend a considerable amount of time under the influence of psychological emotional instability before they are able to finally resettle into South Korean society. “Maladjustment to the work place and initial anxiety caused by culture shock can be overcome as defectors become gradually accustomed to the new life style. Until that time, however, they suffer long-term psychological anxiety” (Suh 2002: 79). In that case, they have to go through different levels of psychological anxiety over a period of five to six years until they fully adapt to the life in South Korea. One major psychological crisis stems from the feeling of guilt about the family left behind in North Korea. They usually suffer from guilty feelings over the political consequences of their defection. In a way, a number of defectors suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or some other forms of serious depression. To make the matter worse, when the defectors experience economic failure in South Korea, they not only regret leaving but also feel guilt about their families left behind in North Korea.

Lastly, “many North Korean defectors also face prejudice from some South Koreans, who perceive the defectors as socialists who are dependent, passive, lazy, and selfish” (Tara O 2011: 161). Additionally, some South Koreans are not interested in the defectors simply because they are too busy in the competitive society of South Korea, Thus, the prejudice against the defectors makes adjusting to the new life even more difficult. However, even all those problems in adjusting

to a new life in South Korea, a substantial number of North Korean defectors continue to arrive in South Korea. “Most South Koreans do not understand the difficulty defectors face in integrating themselves into South Korea, and most do not want to bother. But if such attitudes persists, the social divisions could contribute to discontent, leading a serious social problems and fractures” (Tara O 2011: 164). The influx of North Koreans will continue and South Koreans should notice the change of social structure in the near future, and they should prepare for the possible unification of Korean Peninsula in the future.

Suggestions for Improvements

North Korean defectors resettling in South Korea experience various difficulties in their adaption to South Korea society. A majority of them confront obstacles in achieving social, economic, and psychological transitions into their newly adopted country of South Korea. Above all, the limited transferability of human capital acquired in North Korea is a great barrier (Yoon 2001: 21). The majority of defectors do not have prerequisite skills or experience to be competitive in South Korean job markets. As a result, they have difficulties adapting to the new socioeconomic and political systems of South Korea. On top of that, the prejudice of South Koreans towards defectors generates more disadvantages for them to get jobs, marry, or to have intimate interpersonal relationships. “Government support policy, which used to change frequently in the scope and level of support, fails to establish long-term economic and social foundations for self-sufficiency among defectors” (Lankov 2006: 9). In this manner, what are the ways for improvement? It is not an easy task for North Koreans to socially adapt in a short period of time.

In short, there are three basic solutions for improving the North Koreans’ adjustment that the South Korean government should emphasize:

First of all, South Korean government should try to utilize North Koreans’ human resources by reeducating them according to their education, work experiences, certificates, and skills

they obtained in North Korea. Secondly, government should make active efforts to provide protected employment opportunities at least at the initial stage of adjustment. Lastly, to incorporate defectors into the opportunity structure of mainstream society, government should expand the diversity of social networks of defectors (Yoon 2001: 24).

As North Koreans were educated in and lived under the communistic ideology, their education remains strongly ingrained in their minds. They are not familiar with the ideology of a free democratic society. “Usually, the defectors do not know why they have to work hard in the South in spite of seeing how wealthy it is compared to North Korea. Believing that equality is the most important social justice, they insist that no differences in compensation should be permitted” (Jeon 2000: 369).

As far as the defectors’ maladjustment is concerned, South Korean government should continue to adjust financial and other support to the defectors to encourage desired behavior, especially in job searches and continued employment. “For humanitarian reason, we should protect and support them” (Yoon 2001: 29). In this respect, the government should provide more detailed and long-term assistance for defectors so as they can get economic independence and sociocultural integration. To do that, it is advisable that South Korean government apply a policy similar to “Affirmative Action” in the U.S., which emphasizes giving opportunities to disadvantaged minority groups.

Despite aid from the government, many North Koreans still struggle to adjust South Korean society. In reality, their expectations cannot be totally fulfilled, even in what they perceived as the Promised Land. “They experience serious problems related to jobs, education, crime, and social adjustment” (Lankov 2006: 1). Occasionally, defectors forget about the misery of their lives back in North Korea and compare themselves with South Korean neighbors. Consequently, they feel relatively deprived and easily frustrated. In relation to this matter, the defectors need to change their mindsets to fully integrate themselves into the host society. A majority of them are perceived

as passive and too reliant on the government. “While they do not want to be treated like second class citizens, many prefer to receive government support rather than work. Further, many defectors view blue-collar jobs as demanding and consider such labor beneath them” (Suh 2002: 84). In a way, the defectors themselves must remove their sense of dependency and develop objective and realistic judgments of their capabilities and opportunities available to them. “In this respect, it is imperative to re-establish a proper relationship between defectors and South Korean society in changing environment” (Yoon 2001: 22).

Correspondingly, South Koreans should admit the fact that social integration of North Koreans is part of the inevitable process of making one Korea. Nevertheless, South Koreans’ prejudice against North Korean defectors make it even harder for the latter to adjust to the life in South Korea. In particular, stereotyping North Koreans as socialists who are dependent, lazy, and selfish is a pervasive misconception among South Koreans. Thus, South Koreans should keep in mind that “prejudices and accompanying acts of discrimination of the host country people have negative impacts on the self-concept and mutual health of traumatized refugees or victims” (Jeon 2000: 370). Above all, South Koreans need to learn to respect and empathize with the defectors’ previous lives in the North and not to simply denounce them as meaningless and shameful. Instead, South Koreans should eliminate their prejudice and accept their brethren.

North Korean Refugees in the United States

Departure

After escaping from North Korea, the defectors stay in China with hopes of moving to their final destination. Presumably, most of them want to go to South Korea because of linguistic and cultural familiarity, as well as resettlement benefits from the South Korean government. However, as Cohen at Brookings indicated “some would like to go to the U.S. because of its varied economic

and educational opportunities” (Cohen 2001: 2). Other than this primary reason, others may simply wish to get away from the discrimination, which North Koreans confront in South Korea. However, a practical reason for the desire to move to U.S. is the influence of social networks, which are often religiously affiliated NGO’s, or some family members or friends who have already settled in the United States. With all those privileges for resettlement in South Korea, “some still choose United States either because they have been turned off of South Korea by stories of discrimination of North Korean defectors or because they feel after overcoming difficulties such as language barrier, the opportunities for success would be greater in the United States” (The Bush Institute: 2014: 7). The Bush Institute simply summarizes the factors motivating North Korean refugee to come to the United States as follows:

The five factors are an influential advisor with in transit, often pastors/ priests, a family member or friend who had already resettled in the United States, interaction with other refugees indention/hiding/holding, interactions with diplomatic or humanitarian personnel, and other factors such as wait time also influenced destinations (2014: 8).

In general, North Korean defectors usually take the route to a third country in Southeast Asia where they have a chance to ask asylum to the U.S. government. Unfortunately, they usually have to be on a waitlist from six months to even more than a year before they get the final approval of refugee status from U.S. embassy. They occasionally find the waiting period too long and eventually withdraw their applications for asylum in the United States and instead go to South Korea. “In one extreme case, a defector was warned in advance on his way to Thailand that the wait for admission to the United States could be very long, so he took an unusual and much more arduous journey from Thailand on his own through South America and Mexico” (The Bush Institute 2014: 8).

Not many North Korean defectors realize that the United States has adopted the policy of the North Korean Human Rights Acts (NKHRA) in 2004 by Bush administration. Although South

Korea is the country of choice for most defectors, NKHRA, which was passed by U.S. Congress, opened up new opportunities for North Korean defectors to settle in the United States. Even though the number of refugees who are granted to asylum is meager, North Koreans will increasingly make efforts to resettle in the United States at any cost. However, in reality, among those North Koreans who arrive in Southeast Asia from China en route to South Korea, many of them do not know that there are opportunities to go to the United States along with the benefits, which are offered by U.S. government.

Arrival

After enduring untold hardships, a few North Korean defectors finally arrive in the host country of the United States. The arrival process is usually assisted by NGO's. Yet, North Koreans have to go through the bureaucratic entry process of the U.S. government to have a new life in the land of opportunity. While North Korean refugees are appreciative of the assistance they receive in the course of arrival at the U.S., they sometimes compare their conditions with those of the North Koreans in South Korea, where their assistance from the South Korean government is more uniform and predictable.

Once they arrive in the U.S., the refugees enjoy a short period of settlement during which time they find housing, take care of medical needs, make connections with the local Korean community, and take English classes. After they are sent to resettlement destination, they get help from the state government, which has different benefit packages for the refugees. They usually receive about \$300 in cash, health insurance, and food stamps from the state for almost eight months. They are also provided with English education and job offers. After about a year of living in the U.S., the refugees are granted permanent residency and are also eligible to apply for citizenship after five years. In this regard, English language training is indispensable to adjust to

the new life. However, “upon reaching the United States, refugees must quickly find employment and become self-sufficient. This leaves little time to study English, a necessary tool to find better employment and to assimilate into American society” (The Bush Institute 2014: 2). They also desperately need transportation to pursue a basic level of independence. Yet, they have to rely on friends or community members for help. As far as health insurance goes, they commonly have little understanding of how insurance policies work, and they often do not even notice that their free health insurance has expired before they have an opportunity to take advantage of it.

Upon arrival, some of the refugees make the most of the support from the government, civil society, and individual actors. Thus, they come to believe the help they receive despite the challenges they face allow them to quickly achieve economic independence. Still, others believe that outside help is scarce and that it is insufficient to help them achieve even a minimal standard of financial independence. Despite new challenges, most of the refugees are satisfied with their decisions to come to the U.S., and they realize in the long run that the opportunities for success are plentiful.

Most of the North Korean refugees eventually end up living within Korean communities scattered in the United States. This is not surprising since the linguistic and cultural familiarity with the Korean immigrants is more than enough to attract them into the diaspora. They can easily get support from Korean ethnic churches and Korean-American NGO’s in the Korean community. Furthermore, they can get jobs in Korean communities without language problems. Besides, when new North Korean refugees arrive in the U.S., they try to get in touch with other refugees who have already settled in Korean communities. They often live together in order to get some help and support from those who arrived earlier than them. In some ways, other Koreans in the community may discriminate them against, but the discrimination is not as severe as in South

Korea. They may simply feel they are looked down or pitied by other Koreans, most of whom experience similar feelings when they first come to the United States. Overall, churches naturally become central part of most North Korean refugees' lives. Some of them are devoted to the religion while others just use the religious institutions only for the sociocultural functions. In particular, when they are sick, church members usually arrange pickup and treatment by Korean doctors almost without any cost. Outside of the church community, refugees usually ask for help to NGO's for help when it comes to government-related tasks, including procuring official documents or getting health checkups.

Under these circumstances, some young North Korean refugees are lucky enough to be full-time students. "However, this was possible only for those who were relatively young when they arrived and came with their parents or those who were placed with a host family that could bear a substantial portion of their living costs" (Bush Institute 2014: 2). Even so, they still face difficulties in acclimating to student culture and classes that are conducted in English. Consequently, they have better chances of broadening the range of social connections outside the Korean community and adapting more fully and quickly to their new life in the United States. However, even with all those positive aspects of North Koreans' resettlement in the U.S., there is also a flip side. Some of them happen to lead miserable lives, and cold hard truth for many is that the "American dream" is far from reality. As is the case for many North Koreans who resettle in South Korea, real life in this land is harsher than they dreamed of during the course of their treacherous journey. In fact, some North Korean defectors come to the U.S. with the aid of brokers, many of whom are Korean-Chinese or overseas South Koreans. After resettlement, North Korean refugees have to pay \$6,000 for the broker fees. This is very burdensome, as many refugees usually engage in minimum-wage menial jobs, which barely cover the rent and food costs, much less

money to pay back debts. The “cost of defection” is the first obstacle to overcome for these kinds of refugees. On the other hand, there are some others who are eager to learn English and attend college to get decent jobs. In some cases, refugees become U.S. citizens and enjoy their successful lives. There are two sides to every coin.

Problems of adaptation in the United States

In the introduction of this paper, I indicated that in recent years, increasingly more North Korean defectors prefer to resettle in North America than South Korea. Kyung-hwa Song (2012) indicates that 1,194 North Koreans chose the United States and European countries as their final destination for refugee status or exile, while 2,376 chose South Korea. In other words, one in three North Korean defectors is heading to the countries other than South Korea. In fact, the United States has emerged as the main destination for North Korean defectors since 2006.

Cohen (2011) argues that there are many barriers to the State Department’s commitment to increased reception of North Korean refugees. She suggests four basic obstacles that the U.S. government to curb North Koreans from entering the U.S.:

First America’s general attitude is that North Korean refugees should be going to South Korea because of their shared ethnicity, language, culture, and history. Second, there has been misinterpretation of the South Korean Constitution that United States officials have rendered all defecting North Koreans as ineligible for refugee status in the United States. Third, there is a long delay taken for the United States to process North Korean applications and have sought resettlement in South Korea instead. Lastly, the attitude of other governments such as China also presents an obstacle because they are hesitant to let the United States establish refugee resettlement program in their countries, which would flood these nations with refugees and potentially strain their delicate relations with the unpredictable Pyongyang (Cohen 2011: 3).

Even with all those political obstacles of the U.S. government, North Korean defectors are still eager to resettle in the United States because of the pull factors of this rich country. However,

adaptation and assimilation to the new environment of the United States can be even harder than that of South Korea. Some young North Korean defectors often come out in the media or talk shows and share their successful life stories in the United States, but there are many negative stories that do not get much publicity. “North Koreans who are resettled in the United States mostly struggle to adjust a new language and culture” (GAO Report 2010: 44). Even in South Korea, North Koreans face difficulties with Korean language due to the difference in dialects. In the U.S., they face even more extreme language barriers, not to mention cultural differences. Under these circumstances, some North Koreans face physical health problems and psychological distress, and socioeconomic problems. “Some of them arrive in the United States in poor health and have suffered from traumatic and stressful experiences” (GAO Report 2010: 44). In addition to those problems, they also have issues related to working in South Korean ethnic communities in major U.S. cities. There have been several incidents in Koreatowns where North Koreans were treated badly by South Koreans and ended up taking their own lives because they were unable to deal with the shame and stress. North Koreans are discriminated against in Korean ethnic communities because of their own low socioeconomic and occupational status. On the other hand, most South Korean immigrants do not show interests in North Koreans, and most employers tend to see them merely as manual laborers. In this context, North Koreans cannot fully join the mainstream of Korean ethnic communities.

Alongside all of those negative aspects of North Korean defectors’ resettlement in the U.S., there has been a considerable increase in the number of young female defectors who have resettled successfully. Their success narratives have spread among young North Korean defectors in China as well as in South Korea. Surprisingly, the illegal entries of North Korean defectors have been frequently reported in Canada and the United States. As a consequence, new types of illegal

brokers have already emerged and have started to exploit the North Koreans in South Korea who wish to move to the United States. This phenomenon indicates that the pull factors of the U.S. are stronger than those of South Korea. The U.S. undoubtedly attracts many North Korean defectors and, this trend will continue in the future. Therefore, efforts to resolve the political obstacles for the resettlement of North Korean defectors in the U.S. should be pursued. Also, support for the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) should be enhanced for the sake of future North Korean defectors in the United States.

U.S. Government Policy on North Korean Refugees

The U.S. has a history of admitting refugees of special humanitarian concern into the country. After the World War II, more than 600,000 displaced European entered the United States. Some years later, the U.S. granted asylum to people fleeing communist countries during the Cold War era. In 1975, the U.S. government has resettled over 3 million refugees from all over the world. According to a report from Congressional Research Service on “Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy”,

The admission of refugees to the United States and their resettlement here are authorized by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended by the Refugee Act of 1980. The 1980 Act had the basic purposes: (1) to provide a uniform procedure for refugee admissions; and (2) to authorize federal assistance to resettle refugees and promote their self-sufficiency. The incident of the legislation was to end an ad hoc approach to refugee admissions and resettlement that had characterized U.S. refugee policy since World War II (Bruno 2015: 1).

Under this refugee policy, the annual number of refugee admissions and allocation of these numbers by region of the world are set by the President after consultation with Congress (Bruno 2015: 1). Following congressional consultations on the Administration’s proposal, the President issues a Presidential Determination to set the refugee numbers for that year. In actual process of refugee resettlement in the U.S., it is clear that there are three refugee-processing priorities. Priority

one covers refugees for whom resettlement seems to be the appropriate durable solution, who are referred to U.S. refugee program by UNHCR, a U.S. embassy, or a designated NGO. Priority two covers groups of special humanitarian concern to the United States. It includes specific groups that may be defined by their nationalities, clans, ethnicities, or other characteristics. Priority three covers family reunification cases. Refugee applications under priority three are based upon an “affidavit of relationship (AOR)” filled by an eligible relative in the United States (Bruno 2015: 5). Refugees are admitted to the U.S. via the Refugee Act of 1980 and potential refugees are screened outside the United States. In fact, more than 2 million refugees have arrived in the U.S. since the Refugee Act of 1980. Normally, they arrive in the U.S. and are sent to their resettlement destinations. Unlike immigrants who plan their new life in the U.S. most refugees arrive under very different circumstances. “Forced out their home countries, often living in transitional quarters like temporary camps or housing in foreign countries, they often experience fear and uncertainty as they make their way to safe place” (Singer and Wilson 2006: 2).

In the long run, refugees wind up living in U.S. communities. It is a multi-layered process that involves U.S. and international public and private entities. As previously indicated, the priority system is used to identify those most in need of resettlement. In this context, “the U.S refugee resettlement program aims to promote early economic self-sufficiency among refugees. Many local organizations and volunteers work with refugees to assist in getting them acclimated” (Singer and Wilson 2006: 6). Unlike immigrants who enter U.S. through family or employment ties, refugees are admitted on humanitarian grounds, and there is no requirement that they should demonstrate economic sufficiency. In this sense, U.S. government set up the measures to help refugees resettle. “The Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services provides funds to participating states and voluntary agencies “Volags” (and their local

partners) to provide assistance with housing, employment, language learning, and other services for four to eight months after arrival” (Singer and Wilson 2006: 4). As previously mentioned, more than 2 million refugees have arrived in the U.S. since the Refugee Act of 1980, and refugees have been mostly in metropolitan areas with large foreign-born populations. With the help of local, state, and federal government, they can lead socioeconomically successful lives.

U.S. Government Policy on Vietnamese Refugees and its lessons

After the collapse of Saigon in 1975, large number of Vietnamese refugees (boat people) arrived in the United States to start new lives. There have actually been several different waves of Vietnamese migration:

First wave was the group of refugee made up of South Vietnamese government officials who were U.S. related personnel. The second wave was the group of boat people who were mostly Sino-Vietnamese. The third wave was occurred in the early 1980s. This group consisted of boat people as well as those leaving Vietnam under the U.S. Orderly Departure Program. Then in the early 1990s, another large group of refugees reached the American shore under the U.S. Humanitarian Operation Program (Zhou and Bankston 2000: 4).

Through those various waves, more than 2 million Vietnamese people have resettled in the United States. Vietnamese are now fifth largest Asian immigrant group in the United States. In the mid-1990s, the Vietnamese refugee flight subsided. As a result, the arrival of the Vietnamese has become a part of regular family sponsored immigration (Singer and Wilson 2006: 4).

Overall, the tragic exodus of Vietnamese refugee played a critical role in the crafting of current U.S. immigration policies. The U.S. government, motivated by feelings of responsibility for a situation generated by its own military intervention, developed its new refugee policies in coordination with UNHCR. “Because the numbers of Vietnamese refugees admitted to the United States were so large, the U.S. government has to establish an Office of Refugee Resettlement. This system was later expanded in order to handle the resettlement of many other groups” (Campi

2006). Nevertheless, U.S. refugee policies have an ad hoc character, developed as a series of responses to unforeseen and changing policies. Zhou and Bankston (2000) indicated the main points of the U.S. government policies on refugees as follows:

The Refugee Act of 1980 became the most comprehensive piece of refugee legislation in U.S. history. In place of the ‘Seventh Preference Category’ established in 1965, which admitted refugees as part of the total number of immigrants allowed into the United States, the Refugee Act provided for an annual number of admissions for refugees, which was designated independent of the number of immigrants admitted and was to be established each year by the president in consultation with Congress. The legislative Act, then, became a policy of refugee resettlement, reflecting a continuing process, rather than a mere reaction to specific emergency events (Zhou and Bankston 2000: 7).

Under the influence of the Refugee Act of 1980, refugees are sponsored by the U.S. Government or voluntary agencies (Volag) to resettle in the United States. The government assisted the Volags in helping refugees resettle in designated locations. The Volags were private charitable organizations under contract to the U.S. government. Although the government set the general outline of refugee policy, the volunteer agencies were largely charged with implementing that policy. (Zhou and Bankston 2000: 9)

Then, what are the lessons of U.S. Vietnamese refugee policy, which can be applied to the U.S. government policy on North Korean refugees? Overall, Vietnamese refugee policy cannot simply be applied to North Korean refugee policy because the circumstances are different. The former was the result of war and political repression, while the latter has largely been brought about by the North Korean famine during the 1990s. Thus, U.S. has different interests with respect to the refugee issues of the two countries. Conspicuously, the U.S.’s interest in the North Korean refugees is less compelling than those of Vietnamese refugees. Furthermore, the U.S.’s sense of responsibility for Vietnamese refugees cannot be compared to that of North Korean refugees. “However, the passing of NKHRA indicates that the United States is willing to take leadership in

implementing the permanent resettlement of North Korean refugees in a manner similar to what it did during the Indochinese refugee crisis of the late 1970s” (Ji 2011: 58). After all, it is clear that the Vietnamese refugee policy, which was based on the American tradition of humanitarianism, can offer valuable lessons for improving the North Korean refugee policies.

U.S. Government Policy on North Korean Refugee

The U.S. government had little concern about North Korean refugees until 2002, when several North Koreans, aged sixteen to nineteen, entered the U.S. consulate in Shenyang, China and requested asylum. When they were refused, they demonstrated with a hunger strike to promote international attention, and the refugees eventually resettled in South Korea. As a consequence, this event initiated much interest all over the world. After the incident, U.S. Congress began debating what role the U.S. should play in terms of human rights in North Korea. “In June 2002, the House of Representative passed a resolution that called on China to stop the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees and allow UNHCR access to them” (Hallet 2006: 79).

In 2004, President George W. Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA). The act mandates the appointment of special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea. However, North Korean refugees’ human rights did not seem to improve much. The main reason was the lack of information about the situation of North Korean refugees. Furthermore, NKHRA did not have strong intentions to enhance the dire situation of the refugees for various reasons. Accordingly, “the Act has been ineffective in creating opportunities for more than a handful of North Koreans to resettle in the U.S. Fewer than twenty have been designated as refugees or granted asylum” (International Crisis Group 2006: 27). However, in the spring of 2006, resettling in the U.S. went from being an elusive dream to a real option for North Korean asylum seekers. “NGOs and senators advocating human rights had a series of triumphs in 2006, centered on North

Korean Freedom Week activities they have organized annually since 2004. President Bush met with defectors and the family members of abductees, describing his time with them as ‘one of the most moving meetings’ of his presidency” (International Crisis Group 2006: 28).

Jane Kim (2008) summarizes the political nature of NKHRA, and further indicates four practical challenges to the implementation of NKHRA itself:

First, the implications of the Act created high expectations of the federal government amongst potential beneficiaries without the proper procedures and system in place to realize the Act’s mandates. Second, a number of funding issues arose. Funding for such purposes as human rights and democracy programming was previously issued from multiple sources. As these sources were allowed to continue appropriating funds for existing projects, there was little incentive to switch funders and apply for NKHRA appropriations. The third reason is the sensitivity when dealing with other countries hosting North Korean refugees within its border. These countries are hesitant because of the potential tension with North Korea. Lastly, the implementation of NKHRA was hindered by the political nature of the process itself. Congressional members often had their own political motivations for supporting the legislation, including garnering the administration’s compliance to their own U.S.-North Korea Priorities (Kim Jane 2008: 153).

Despite the challenges in implementing NKHRA, there were notable events regarding North Korean human rights and refugees. On May 13, 2008, the U.S. House of Representative amended NKHRA via North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act. “The bill renews funding and adjusts the original 2004 provisions for the Special Envoy and the U.S. resettlement of North Korean refugees while criticizing the slow implementation of the original bill” (Kim Jane 2008: 154). Furthermore, in September 2008, the first instance of a North Korean refugee resettled in the United States receiving permanent residency without an interview occurred. Moreover, other North Korean defectors in the United States have also applied for permanent residency. This was a dramatic shift in NKHRA. “This case was still important because it showed that North Koreans in the United States were following through with the refugee resettlement program and actively

pursuing opportunities provided by government” (Kim Jane 2008: 155).

The election of President Barack Obama marked a change in U.S. policy on North Korean refugees. In particular, President Obama has shown willingness to consider bilateral talks with North Korea to improve relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, North Korean human rights issues seem to be overshadowed by the North Korean nuclear proliferation issue. Although President Obama has his hands full with domestic and foreign policy challenges, he also has obligation as a world leader to help North Korean refugees. He not only has to do his best to free the oppressed North Koreans but also help North Korean refugees resettle successfully in the United States. In this respect, the U.S. government still needs to improve the resettlement programs so that North Korean refugees overcome the challenges confronted in their new life in this Land of Opportunity.

Ways for Improving North Korean Refugees' Resettlement in the U.S.

North Koreans who have resettled in the United States and in South Korea come from an isolated society with limited or no experience with capitalism and thus, they are susceptible to economic difficulties. They usually encounter difficulties in finding jobs and affording basic living expenses. In particular, North Koreans who are resettled in the U.S. have to struggle more because of the new language and different culture. In this respect, the U.S. Government should find a way to increase the number of North Korean refugees and support them as valuable human resources.

To begin with, the State department should explore more intensively with South Korea, as requested by Congress, ‘all possibilities’ for resettling North Koreans in the United States prior to becoming South Korean citizens. U.S. embassies and consulates in Southeast Asian countries could help by featuring prominently on their websites materials in Korean for prospective asylum seekers and refugees so that they are aware of possibilities for resettling in the United States could and should do more (Cohen 2011: 5).

In this way, the U.S. government can secure more prospective North Korean refugees at the point of defection in Southeast Asian countries. “To help North Korean refugees more

smoothly resettle in the United States, the government should undertake a review of how North Koreans are faring under its current resettlement program” (Cohen 2011: 5). Thus, the resettlement problems including English language skills, employment, and housings should be reviewed in a humanitarian manner. “A government review could not only improve the lives of North Koreans already here but could help in planning for larger numbers, especially if there is a collapse in North Korea and a need for international burden sharing” (Cohen 2011: 5). If that should happen, the U.S. government should expect a large influx of North Korean refugees, and prepare to receive them as they did in the time Vietnamese Boat People.

Helping persecuted and impoverished North Koreans who are ready to risk their lives to escape one of the most repressive regimes on this planet is the indispensable duty of the United States. “The United States could and should do more” (Cohen, 2011: 5). Collaboration with Korean government, NGO’s, Korean ethnic communities in major U.S. cities, and religious groups is essential factor to improving the treatment of North Koreans in the United States. In addition, the education of young North Koreans will be the foremost issue in improving the social status of North Korean refugees. As part of a future generation of the U.S. society, young North Koreans will play an essential role and contribute to the national interests of the United States. It is expected to establish distinctive North Korean ethnic enclaves in the “salad bowl” society of the U.S. in the future. Thus, new theories of migration and assimilation should be constructed to accommodate North Koreans.

Conclusion and Discussion

Why do North Koreans cross the border? The answer is quite simple because they are hungry. Yet, it is not so simple to explain or define the complexity of reasons for North Koreans' defection. The movement of North Korean defectors is arduous and full of perils. The defection of North Koreans seems to be voluntary, but ultimately, it is a forced migration. Above all, the general hypothesis in this paper that increasingly more North Koreans will cross the border of China and thus come to South Korea or the United States has been proven to be true based on the data and findings of this research. However, the increasing number of North Korean defectors has generated various political and social issues in China, South Korea, and the U.S.

North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world despite their manufacturing capacity for nuclear weapons. In his article "North Korea and Subversive Truth," Lankov argues that North Korea is the model of a "failed state" (Lankov 2008: 1). Under the control of the most secluded and brutal government in the world, many North Koreans risk their lives to escape hunger and depression. Yet, the desire to make their life better supersedes the threat of the oppressive and violent regime.

North Korean defection is composed of complex factors and it is not so simple to clearly define the multitude of reasons for defection. It entails a combination of forced migration and voluntary movement, or to put it another way, North Korean defection is composed of "opportunity willingness and menu-choices" (Young-hoon Song 2013: 85). Song criticizes the journalists because they generalize and over-simplify North Korean defection as being only a matter of economic migration. Without a doubt, political reasons cannot be the primary motive for defection. Rather, the economic reason is the major factor in their decision to defect. However, when it comes to the refugee status issue, North Korean defectors can still prove the fact that they fled North

Korea because of the political reasons. Becoming a defector or a refugee is a matter of life or death for North Koreans who wish to flee their home country.

In fact, “defector” is not a sociological term. This term is widely used by journalists who focus on muckraking human rights abuse issues. Shin-Hwa Lee (2013) briefly explains the term, which refers to “individual who have fled North Korea” (2013: 185). Bell (2012) also indicates that the term “defector” has hidden meanings, such as “traitor” and “reactionary.” For this reason, North Korean refugees do not like this term because it has negative connotations. However, the status of defector also refers to the stage before getting official approvals as asylum seekers in other countries; it refers to people who fled their home country in the process of escaping to other places for resettlement.

To this point, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2013) clarifies the definition of refugee under the section 101(a) (42) of the INA (Immigration and Nationality Act).

Any person who is outside of country of such person’s nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (INA: 101(a) (42); U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2013: 9).

To meet refugee status, the defectors must “establish that he or she is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country because of past or feared persecution” (INA 2013: 18). In general, “refugees have an experience with political oppression and violence, flight rather than departure, and exile instead of access to the homeland” (Hein 1995: 153). After all, they should “meet the requirement of being forced to leave owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted reasons before a decision can be made whether an individual asylum seeker is granted refugee status” (Lee Shin-Wha 2013: 190). Lee Shin-Wha also points out that economic difficulties and food crisis are

not sufficient to support to achieve refugee status in third countries. Even the definition of refugee largely emphasizes the state of refugee to those who cope with the fear of political persecution. “People who flee persecution and then cannot return to their homeland for a long period of time are refugees” (Hein 1995: 1).

Under the terms of the 1980 Refugee Act, State Department’s political division usually asks a few questions to judge whether to recognize someone as a refugee or not (Garcia 2006). For example, “Why are you different from everyone else in your country? How have you been singled out, threatened, imprisoned, tortured, harassed?” (Aguayo and Fagen 1984: 369; Garcia 2006: 89). Above all, asylum seekers should “provide evidence of a ‘clear probability’ of persecution, which was often impossible to prove” (2006: 89). In this respect, it is true that the North Korean defectors have suffered from fear of persecution in North Korea based on political dictatorship. As they are not willing to return to their homelands, they should naturally earn refugee status in third countries.

Historically, the U.S. supported Indochinese resettlement in 1954 not only for the support of “rebuilding war-torn economies and cementing ties among the new allies” (Barnet 1983; Hein 1995: 12), but also for their own benefit, in order to enhance their international reputation and display national power. Despite those efforts, the U.S. limits the number of how many North Koreans it accepts due to the traumatic experience from 9/11 terrorist attacks and risk of nuclear weapons and missiles. Thus, it is believed that once they approve accepting a large number of the North Korean defectors, the U.S. will be more vulnerable to the communists and the terrorists from North Korea. “Safeguarding civil liberties, due process, and human rights is often trumped in the name of national security” (Garcia 2006: 12). In other words, United States keeps its “immigration ceilings high” (Strand 1985: 141) for North Korean defectors. To this stern standpoint of U.S. policy, I argue that the U.S. government should establish a more pro-active approach to resolve

the North Korean refugee crisis. Above all, the humanitarian spirit of NKHRA as well as UNHCR is the basis of humanitarianism in the “the nation of immigrants”.

All in all, North Korea, China, South Korea, and the United States each have their own role in resolving the North Korean refugee issue. Thus, the four countries involved in this issue should make an effort to improve the situation, and occasionally endeavor to collaborate to find the better solution. More than anything else, North Korea should look squarely at the reality of the outside world and cease being a reclusive hermit kingdom. It is evident that North Korea’s unclear nuclear ambition exacerbated its isolation from the rest of the world. As a consequence, its economy has been deteriorated and its people are suffering from hunger. To diffuse the crisis in North Korea, China, South Korea, and the United States should use friendly persuasion to motivate North Korea to pursue their own economic restoration by establishing trade and diplomatic relations with other nations, particularly other countries in East Asia.

On the other hand, the South Korean government and its people should admit that North Koreans are not very good at adjusting to South Korean society. In particular, many South Koreans consider North Korean defectors as a social burden and a political irritant in relation to the North Korean regime. Lankov indicates, “The defectors’ experience testifies to the persistent and deep distinctions between the peoples of the two Koreas. This experience confirms that the unification of the two Korean states will be not only costly, but also socially difficult” (Lankov 2009: 19). In fact, South Korean government has failed to maintain a consistent policy towards North Korean refugees due to the changes in the presidency. Undoubtedly, the basic rule of policy towards North Korea and its refugees should be based on the principle that Korea is just one country.

On the whole, the crisis of North Korean defectors in China mainly stems from China’s negligence of the UNHCR agreement. As indicated previously, although China is a member of the

U.N. Refugee Convention and Protocol, it does not comply with its obligation. Thus, as undocumented migrants, North Korea defectors suffer from various problems in China. They have no legal protection and live in constant fear of arrest and deportation. To solve this plight of North Korean defectors, Chinese authorities should, first of all, reevaluate their obligation of UNHCR and try to set up a new policy over battered North Koreans based on human rights. They should also take a broader macro view that complying with their UNHCR obligation will ultimately be good for their national interests. Granting the refugee status to North Korean defectors will not only give “Great China” a chance to demonstrate its generosity regarding human rights, but also enhance its reputation as a world superpower. In doing so, China stands to gain prestige in the international community. Perhaps more importantly, it will play a positive role in Asia and the world.

As was mentioned in the hypotheses of this paper, increasingly more North Korean defectors, especially young generation, will choose to come to the United States rather than South Korea. However, it is clear that the U.S. government has not prepared for the large influx of North Koreans due to complex political reasons. In fact, there are many scenarios in which a large number of North Koreans will one day reach American shores, just like Vietnamese refugees did several decades ago. The North Korean refugee issue is a serious one, but the number of those who have successfully attained refugee status is too small. It is noteworthy that North Korean refugees in this “land of immigrants” will contribute to valuable human capital to U.S. society. In this respect, the U.S. government should establish a more solid policy other than NKHRA.

North Korean defection is not the only problem caused by the separation of Korea. “It raises important policy issues, most centrally not only for China and South Korea, but also for the United States, the U.N. and other concerned parties” (Akaha 2013: 172). In this sense, the

refugee crisis should be considered from the standpoint of international law (Lee Shin-Wha 2006). Most of all, the international community should understand and identify the reason why North Korean defectors seek asylum. Even today, somewhere along the Chinese-North Korean border, some North Koreans are crossing the Tumen River in search of their better lives far from persecution and starvation of their home country regime. I hope that the plight of North Korean defectors is well described in this paper so it can capture the attention of the free world. As the North Korean defectors' issue can be a pioneering research in relation to migration theories, I hope that my research will make a small contribution to the sociological field. Overall, the major purpose of this study lies in understanding the situation faced by North Korean defectors in China, South Korea, and the United States. More specifically, I put focus on the future aspects of the new influx of North Koreans into those three related countries. I believe the findings of this study will be the basis for my future research on North Korean defectors.

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